

Designing an Advanced Speaking Course

By Linda Bawcom

This article sets forth eleven steps taken in designing a speaking course for students who had completed at least five hundred hours of English instruction.

The necessity for designing this course arose due to the fact that no single book was available which met our syllabus outline. Therefore, teachers presenting this course for the first time found themselves desperately searching for material. And though a plenitude of material could be found or created, teachers were often dissatisfied at the end of the course due to its lack of continuity.

Step 1: Approach . In designing a new course in advanced speaking, it was decided to make it content-based, and allow task to dictate function. This decision was made because at the advanced level students had already been presented with a variety of functions for the purposes of exchanging opinions and ideas.

Step 2: Selection of Topics. While considering what topics to select, it occurred to me that the best place to look would be *The Reader's Guide to Periodicals* , the reference book for journal and magazine articles written on specific topics. In the back of the book is a topic index. I went through the entire list of topics asking myself two major questions: Can I get material for this? Will it be interesting to my students? Based on this, I selected twelve topics.

Step 3: Questionnaire. The best way to find out what topics students are interested in is to ask them (see Figure 1 below). Therefore, after selecting the 12 topics, I devised a questionnaire and asked teachers to have their advanced students complete them. The students were asked to rate the topics from 3 (very interesting) to 0 (boring). This four point scale was decided upon because with a three point scale, we were worried that students might have a tendency to take the "middle of the road" choice leaving us with a sampling that would show almost all topics as being, at the least, interesting. They were then asked to select their five favorite topics from the list, and rank them in order of preference (1 being their first choice). Five choices were asked for since this was thought to be the maximum number of topics that could be covered within the time frame of the course. They were then asked to choose and mark with an X the first five most interesting subtopics, and to mark with an O the five least interesting. In this case, the number five was chosen purely for the sake of simplicity in doing the

statistical analysis. I also asked the teachers to complete a similar questionnaire, but without the subtopic choice as this would have taken too long to compute.

Step 4: Analysis . The most time-consuming step involved putting the topics and subtopics on a spreadsheet in order to do the calculations on the computer. 325 students (57% of the advanced students) and 38 teachers (45%) answered the questionnaire. As can be seen in Figure 2 below , 87% of the students rated the topic "Ethics" as their first choice. For the most part, the subtopics chosen as most interesting correspond with the five top ranked topics, although not necessarily in the same order.

A comparison between student and teacher rating shows a vast difference in what teachers thought would be most interesting for their students, compared to the students' interest.

A few teachers commented that almost any topic could be made interesting depending upon the way in which it was presented and the task that was assigned. A few teachers didn't particularly care for any of the topics which had been selected.

Step 5: Activities, Functions and Exercises. In order to have an idea reference bank, I made a partial list of activities, exercises, notions, functions and thinking processes that I collected from reference sources, texts, and activity books. I did not make an exhaustive list as I only needed enough variety for a 30 hour course. (See Activities)

Step 6: Gathering Material. Finding material on the topics which the students had chosen and creating exercises and activities to accompany them was the second most time-consuming step. In addition to receiving material from teachers who were kind enough to share, I also went back to *the Reader's Guide to Periodicals* for material. Furthermore, I looked through back issues of *Forum* , textbooks and activity books. When I liked an activity or article, but felt there would be a problem due to copyright laws, I decided either to adapt it or not to use it.

Step 7: Matching Tasks and Activities to Material. Most material fell naturally into certain activities or tasks such as jigsaws combined with discussion or problem solving (Personality), storytelling (Crime), making a commercial (Ethics in Advertising), and so on.

These tasks and activities also lent themselves to a varied use of functions and cognitive processes.

Step 8: Scope and Sequence. After selecting and creating material, which included audio cassettes as well as various excerpts from television programs, I wrote the scope and sequence. I listed the topics, the material to be used, the functions which could be employed, and at times, the grammar that I thought might be helpful to review before beginning a task or exercise.

Step 9: Designing the Packet. Because I'm fortunate enough to have a computer, typing up the material and putting it together to make a packet was the easiest step.

I designed two packets: one for the students, and another for the teacher. The two packets were identical except that the teacher's packet had day-by-day lesson plans, and ideas for the evaluation of students' speaking abilities. For the sake of convenience, the information gap activities (e.g. roleplays and jigsaw activities) were photocopied on one side of a page only so the teacher could cut them for use in class.

Step 10: Piloting. The next to last step was enlisting the aid of teachers to pilot the packet in their classrooms, comment on the design and activities and offer helpful suggestions.

This was done simply by having the teacher leave me a note, or return the packet with his or her comments.

Step 11: Editing. After the piloting, based on teachers' comments, it was necessary to revise the packet by eliminating exercises and activities which were either too long or not found to be successful. I also had to reorganize some units since many teachers did not necessarily follow the lesson plans in order. In addition, I added fillers-5 or 10 minute activities involving cultural questionnaires and information or idiomatic expressions. These fillers were useful in presenting cultural differences to students; and from a practical point of view, they helped to fill the time while some groups of students waited for others to complete assigned activities.

Conclusion

As it turned out, I amassed much more material than was necessary. This material was put in our files for teachers who wanted to supplement a unit. Before the final editing, I also asked teachers to inform me as to how much of the packet they had used. The results ranged from 25% to 75%. Because of these results, we stopped making packets for the students so the teachers could choose the material they wished to use and reproduce copies for their classes.

In the end, the packet included the following thematic units: Personality, Human Relations, Ethics, and Crime.

Although my project was not organized along the basis of a formal, scientific research project, it served three primary purposes. First, some continuity was established for the Advanced Speaking course. Second, it served as a syllabus for teachers who were teaching this course for the first time. And finally, it has served as a source from which revisions and innovations have emerged.

In closing, I would like to acknowledge Jim Purpura, who was the Academic Director at that time, since it was through his guidance and direction that I was able to complete this project.

ACTIVITIES

- acting out role plays
- analyzing a problem
- brainstorming
- convincing someone to buy something
- critical assessment of books, plays, TV programs and movies
- debating
- describing people
- describing personal experiences:
embarrassing, frightening, or funny situations, dreams
- describing a process
- designing publicity campaigns
- explaining the location of a place
or object initiating conversations:
- interviewing: personal questions,
hypothetical questions
- informing someone about your
country for alphabetical ordering
- jigsaw listening, reading and
making commercials
- making impromptu speeches
- making presentations
- planning projects: a commune,
educational institute, expedition
- ranking: (qualities, jobs,)
- retelling a story, summarizing
- seeking advice: polls, surveys
- talking about events,
- telling a story from another person's point of view

- writing dialogs, skits and plays'

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Figure 1

Student Questionnaire

Evaluate the topics listed below according to the following scale:

3 = *very interesting*

1 = *not so interesting*

2 = *interesting*

0 = *boring*

Write the number of the rating next to the category.

I. Rating Topics

1. ___ CRIME (justice, computers, self-defense, drugs, prevention, etc.)
2. ___ ECOLOGY (pollution, energy, urban renewal, etc.)
3. ___ EDUCATION (problems, experience vs. academic requirements, etc.)
4. ___ ETHICS (business, euthanasia, personal relations, advertising, the media, test-tube babies, smoking, abortion, terrorism, etc.)
5. ___ ETHNICITY and STEREOTYPING (cultural stereotyping, men vs. women, effects on employment, etc.)
6. ___ HEALTH, FITNESS and BEAUTY (dieting, exercising, advertising, appearance, etc.)
7. ___ INTELLIGENCE (men vs. women, environment vs. hereditary factors, beauty vs. intelligence, etc.)
8. ___ HUMAN RELATIONS (dating, marriage, bonding, children, divorce, etc.)
9. ___ MONEY (finance, gambling, fraud, consumerism, etc.)
10. ___ PERSONALITY (psychology, astrology, numerology, dreams, conflicts, etc.)
11. ___ PERCEPTIONS ON AGING (retirement, taking care of the elderly, euthanasia, discrimination against the elderly etc.)
12. ___ THE UNITED STATES (cross-cultural aspects, politics, subcultures, racism, economy, labor, music, sports, etc.)

II. Using the number given for the topics (1-12), please rank the five you are most interested in.

1. ___ 2. ___ 3. ___ 4. ___ 5. ___

III. Listed below are the subtopics from the first page. Put an X by five of those you consider very interesting and an O by five you think would not be interesting at all.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> abortion | <input type="checkbox"/> gambling |
| <input type="checkbox"/> astrology | <input type="checkbox"/> genetic engineering |
| <input type="checkbox"/> beauty vs. intelligence | <input type="checkbox"/> justice and the law |
| <input type="checkbox"/> caring for the elderly | <input type="checkbox"/> marriage and bonding |
| <input type="checkbox"/> children's rights | <input type="checkbox"/> men vs. women |
| <input type="checkbox"/> crime and prevention | <input type="checkbox"/> numerology |
| <input type="checkbox"/> cross-culture | <input type="checkbox"/> personality conflicts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> cultural stereotyping | <input type="checkbox"/> personality analysis |
| <input type="checkbox"/> dating | <input type="checkbox"/> pollution and the environment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> drugs | <input type="checkbox"/> discrimination against the elderly |
| <input type="checkbox"/> dieting | <input type="checkbox"/> divorce |
| <input type="checkbox"/> retirement | <input type="checkbox"/> education requirements |
| <input type="checkbox"/> self-defense | <input type="checkbox"/> terrorism |
| <input type="checkbox"/> dreams | <input type="checkbox"/> environment vs. hereditary in intelligence |
| <input type="checkbox"/> smoking | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> energy | |
- TOPICS RELATING TO THE U.S.**
- | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> ethics in advertising | <input type="checkbox"/> economy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ethics in business | <input type="checkbox"/> labor |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ethics in the media | <input type="checkbox"/> politics |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ethics in personal relationships | <input type="checkbox"/> fraud |
| <input type="checkbox"/> exercising | <input type="checkbox"/> racism |
| <input type="checkbox"/> euthanasia | <input type="checkbox"/> subcultures |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> finance |

IV. Are there any topics not listed that you enjoy discussing? Please list them.

Figure 2

**Student's and Teacher's
ratings of topics***

Students polled: 325

Teachers polled: 38

TOPIC	STUDENTS	TEACHERS
Ethics	87%	26%
The United States	78%	47%
Ecology	76%	58%
Crime	75%	37%
Personality	70%	47%
Intelligence	66%	26%
Education	65%	26%
Human Relations	64%	58%
Ethnicity and Stereotyping	52%	50%
Perceptions on Aging	48%	8%
Money	48%	13%
Health, Fitness and Beauty	42%	21%

* *Percentage = Very*

Interesting+Interesting

Results of Students' Ranking of Top Five Topics

Listed in order of rank: Ethics; the United States; Money; Health, Fitness, and Beauty; Perception of Aging.

Students' Rating of the 10 Most Interesting Subtopics

Listed in order of interest: Pollution; Genetics; Racism; Subcultures in the U.S.; Cross Culture; Energy; Drugs; Terrorism; Ethics in Personal Relations; Abortion; Men vs.Women; Justice and the Law; and Euthanasia.